

CHAPTER 1

Think Small

Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.

VIRGINIA WOOLF

A few years ago a friend of mine traveled to Florida with his wife and young son for a family vacation at Disney World. Shortly after their return I asked my friend what his son had liked best. With a soft smile and gentle eye roll he replied: “The luggage carousel at the airport.”

In recounting this brief exchange I intend no offense to the fine Imagineers at the Magic Kingdom. But a child will be captivated by what he or she finds captivating—whether or not it’s the featured attraction. For my friend’s small son, an apparatus that miraculously

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birthed a conga line of jostling travel bags was just such a source of wonder.

Zen Buddhists sometimes speak of “beginner’s mind” (*shoshin*), a state of openness uncolored by preconceptions or so-called life lessons. Beginner’s mind can be highly useful in many situations and for many tasks. Children, being children, manifest beginner’s mind quite naturally. For that very reason they can sometimes school the rest of us in everyday wonder, as my friend’s son so aptly proved.

When one of his followers asked the great Japanese haiku master Bashō (1644-1694) how to write haiku, he suggested finding a three-foot-tall child.

Those of us in the West tend to think differently. How often we assign things or events a level of importance relative to their size or their demands on our attention. Nowhere is this cultural bias more evident than in the United States where “bigger is better” could serve admirably as our national credo. To cite but three examples, American automobiles, homes and restaurant portions tend to dwarf their counterparts elsewhere.

Our bias towards bigness may trace in part to America’s distinctive geography and history. Once

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freed of their colonial bonds, Americans of European ancestry began to look westward with a growing sense of opportunity and challenge (“Go West, young man”) matched only in scale by the seeming endlessness of the continent before them. Boundless aspirations became the norm.

While population pressures certainly led to expansion, a sense of divine mission provided its own impetus. The belief of many Americans in our nation’s “manifest destiny,” though conceptually based on democracy and freedom, was both historically and rhetorically rooted in religion. Proponents of manifest destiny often spoke of America’s “divine providence.” (On the reverse side of our one-dollar bill can be found the words *Annuit Cœptis*—“He [God] has favored our undertakings”—just above the Eye of Providence, both tracing back to the 1782 design of the young republic’s Great Seal.) And manifest destiny embraced Thomas Jefferson’s vision of America as an agrarian nation whose Western wilds could be tamed for the benefit of its citizens—a vision in perfect accord with the Biblical notion of man’s dominion over the Earth and all its creatures.

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Compare that to the Japanese perspective on nature described by Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki:

The moon and the sun, storms and waves, mountains and rivers—so-called bigger aspects of Nature—will also engage their attention, but what I wish to emphasize here is the Japanese sensitivity for the small things of Nature generally neglected by people of the West, and the fact that these insignificant and ignoble creatures are in intimate relationship with the grand totality of the cosmic scheme.

This difference between West and East is profound: a sense of dominion over (frequently seen as an indifference towards) “the small things of Nature” versus a solicitous fellow-feeling for those same small things. Our own bias towards bigness ends up rewarding us with a giant blind spot in our day-to-day existence: it occludes a world of wonder right before our very eyes.

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But we can see and reclaim that world with haiku.

Haiku poetry brings us into the world of small wonders in multiple ways. First and foremost it plainly asserts, through its choice of subjects, that the modest things we tend to overlook and the common events we take for granted are worthy of our attention.

last night's rain
cupped in a banana leaf
a small green frog

Ferris Gilli

farmer's market
a ladybug comes
with the kale

Kirsty Karkow

In this respect, as in so many others, haiku reflects Buddhist principles. As pioneering haiku translator and commentator R. H. Blyth noted, “the belief that

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everything will someday attain Buddhahood gives value (gives equal value) to the most trivial objects.”

Haiku challenges our very notion of what *is* trivial. If we can convert our fresh attentiveness to contemplation, then we too may be able, in the words of William Blake, “To see a World in a Grain of Sand.”

waiting . . .
a leaf falls
into my lap

Owen Bullock

minute of silence . . .
a single fir needle
on the hardwood floor

Tanya McDonald

Worlds unto themselves, the small things featured in haiku may also occasionally hint at their “intimate relationship with the grand totality of the cosmic scheme.”

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forested ravine
just enough light let through
to gild a ripple

Shelly Chang

prairie stream—
what I know about mountains
in these small stones

Chad Lee Robinson

We know from modern science that viruses can fell Olympians, DNA can spell destiny, and atoms can destroy worlds. Yet so often we ignore the little things we can actually see. With haiku—the tiniest of all poems—we can discover the enormous power in “what is commonly thought small” . . . and the wonder in what’s hiding, here and now, in plain sight.